

The Final Note

ROLAND GOITY

Boxes everywhere. And strapping tape, lots of strapping tape. Enough to mark a football field end zone to end zone and then wind its way up the goal post. I'm on my fifth roll already, and my second pack of Marlboro Reds. The scent of stale cigarette smoke fails to mask the sterility in the air; I've scrubbed the porcelain tub and Formica countertops, mopped each and every linoleum tile, vacuumed every section of rug and dusted the sills and ceiling corners. I've lodged a pine-fragranced air freshener by the foot of the door so as not to forget to give the place a spray before my final exit.

My once-upon-a-time-considered-trendy Silver Lake apartment is now almost bare. No bed, no couch, no dining table. No television, no desk, no stereo system. Not even a clock radio. Only the screeching hiss of the packaging tape as I assemble another box and the sound of white noise coming through the window from cars and trucks and motorcycles and buses as they pass along Glendale Boulevard two stories below.

Better get used to it I guess. I'm giving up on the music business. Times were good once, but I can't make the rent anymore. Just can't make ends meet on coffee shop gigs where my sets are no match for the grating decibels of the espresso grinders. And guitar instruction? Don't get me started. I almost came to blows with that Soldofsky dude who thought he was the next Jimi Hendrix, when in reality kids half his age could play circles around him. Nope, even those fateful

endeavors didn't pay the rent. So I'm giving up the music business, and—more than that—giving up the only life I've known. A week from now, me and all my shit will be back in Cherry Hill. I'll be wearing Italian suits and silk ties instead of leather jackets and black tees. It'll take some getting used to. The hardest part is trading in my tools of the trade. Trading in my guitar and amp for a corner office and desktop computer. That's the real killer.

Terry and Dave and Dave's wife, Sara, helped me load the heavy stuff into the fourteen-footer earlier today. Sara supervised really, and, while sweat streaked down my face as *I bent at the knees, at the knees* to avoid throwing out my back again, she kept saying how she couldn't picture me in a suit, how she couldn't imagine me without my guitar, singing. In between grunts, Dave had echoed her sentiments: "Do you know what the fuck you're doing, man?"

"If I could figure out some way to scrape up a decent living in the music scene, I'd do it like that," I said, snapping my fingers after we wedged the dresser into the corner of the truck. "But Peace Attack's time has come and gone and the solo shit just ain't happening. It's time to move on."

Terry nodded with the certainty of a man who'd spent years immersed in the trenches with yours truly. Dave and Sara, however, weren't convinced. During the next few trips back and forth Sara's probing questions made me feel like I was on trial for murder or something. *Shit*, I kept thinking between terse, open-ended responses, *Can't a fuck-up do right for once and become a productive member of the human race?* Their looks told me otherwise, but I'm in no position to second guess myself.

In any event, they did help me get the heavy, bulky stuff out of the apartment and now I'm pretty much down to sorting clothes and my endless piles of knick knacks. And, before discarding it to the trash, I can't forget to take a peek at the contents inside the envelope dangling from the edge of the mantle. Can't forget to do that.

For dinner, my Last Supper, I've got half a ham and cheese with pimento mayo left in the fridge and a couple of beers to wash it down with. Then the fridge will be empty, too. I hope to finish before midnight so I can get a good start in the morning. I'd like to make it to Colorado if possible. As for tonight, Terry said I could crash at his place, but I'll probably just unfurl my sleeping bag and Therm-a-Rest for the final night on this floor. Rather anti-climactic after all that went down here. Nearly a decade of good times and bad, but times no earthling would consider dull. Like when the entire band did lines, one after the other, off Courtney Love's naked body—from her pierced belly to her shaved mound. She was passed out at the time, thankfully, or otherwise she might have flinched. Then there was the time after a performance when we invited dozens of fans to join us in the world's largest game of Twister—in my goddamn apartment! Who can forget that? Not the neighbors, believe me. But that was a while ago now. All that crazy shit ended last year. That's when the band split up.

A digitized trumpet call echoes from the kitchen counter and I wander over to answer the cavalry charge ring of my cell phone. "What's up?" I ask, not bothering to screen the number first.

"Our company's revenue figures are up once you arrive, Ty. That's what's up. Am I right? Am I right?" A loud husky voice laughs through my earpiece. It's my brother-in-law, Anton.

"Yeah, man. If I want to keep my new job, I guess."

I say it a little too matter-of-factly, and Anton's no longer laughing. All I get at first is an awkward clearing of the throat from clear across the country. So very far away.

"Well. Tammy and I are ready for you," he says. "Got the guest bedroom all set up real good."

"I didn't think you guys had a guest bedroom anymore."

"Well, Amber will be rooming with her little brother for a while," he says. "For as long as necessary. It's no problem"

This is great. My seven-year-old niece probably hates me, and I haven't even seen her in three years.

"It won't be long," I say limply. "Just a month or two until I can find a place."

Anton says he's sure it'll all work out. He's a good guy. A good East-Coast family kind of guy. Many months ago my sister and I began phoning each other frequently as my situation started spiraling. We had our share of arguments and testy conversations over what I should do next. She and Anton urged me to consider joining the world of suits. My counterproposal was to wallow away my days as a street musician, holding onto my guitar like a security blanket, but that idea got no traction. We considered the many positives of going back to school to get my degree; there was some merit in that one. But—in the end—I went where the money is. I went with door number one.

So now she and Anton have come through with temporary housing and a hot-shot position many rungs up the career ladder. In just days my vocation changes to director of business development for

Thompson IT Consulting in Philadelphia. It's a glorified sales position he's told me. But an important one, and an extremely high-paying one if I'm even moderately successful. I had my doubts, but Anton says my "natural charisma" assures him I'll do fine. We'll see.

He asks how the packing's going and I tell him only three hundred boxes to go. He laughs again, but I'm serious. Before we hang up, he tells me to enjoy the trip east and take my time, don't push it. When I jokingly inquire whether that means there's some wiggle room with the start date, I can hear him sucking air. "No," he says. "You gotta be in the office on the seventh, nine a.m. sharp. It's my father's company, not mine, remember? He's a tough sell, but I won him over. I got faith in you, Ty," he says before hanging up.

I'm glad someone does. I still haven't quite warmed up to the idea of a conventional morning, noon, and night. Up with sun, cup of coffee out the door, sitting at an oak desk in an office by nine. Who knows? Maybe before too long I'll return from work to my *own* home, literally one I own not rent. A pretty gal, my wife, will open the door and greet me with a kiss. Then she'll take my briefcase, hand me a drink, and alert me an hour later when dinner's ready. Yeah, like *that's* gonna happen.

It's funny, Kendra coulda been the one. It wasn't hard to picture her waiting for me, despite it all. Her greatest wish was that the two of us would always remain together. But I pushed her away, too concerned with letting anyone or anything interfere with my industry ambitions. There'd be nights where she'd have her bags packed, ready to leave in the morning, but (always alerted to such happenings and my impending dire straits) I'd write a love song for her, or surprise her

with jewelry. Or I might return to her with an eight-ball of coke and handy vanity for instant gratification; anything to delay the inevitable. One time it cost me a week's stay at a swanky resort in Tahiti.

But that was my doing. She didn't ask for much, really. She just wanted me to get my life in order, be someone she could rely on, someone who could shoulder some responsibility. Now, of course, it's too late. I'm finally ready to make the move, but Kendra's long ago made hers, with a middle-aged television producer, three times divorced, who's got a sprawling home in the Malibu Hills. I wish her well, you know. Really, I do.

I get back to my mission—packing. I'm trying to quickly compile my little odds and ends into manila folders, Ziploc storage bags, and vase-like mugs before tossing them into one of the countless boxes, marking each immediately with a black Sharpie so I have some kind of game plan where to set things when I land in Jersey. Some might brush off such items as meaningless, but, to me, each has a personal, sentimental meaning. Every grungy, moth-eaten t-shirt; every ticket stub, club poster and booking calendar. I open up a Whitman's sampler box, shaped like a cigar box, that houses at least a dozen guitar picks, each individually wrapped in tiny plastic pouches with folded 3" x 5" cards on which I'd long ago written the date, the venue and the guitar player who discarded said pick—7/2/84, The Atlantic City Convention Center, Andy Summers of the Police—5 /11/85, The Capitol Theater in Passaic, Todd Rundgren—9/1/87, Madison Square Garden, Carlos Alomar of David Bowie's band—and many, many others. Though I'm trying to speed on through the task at hand, the contents that replaced the chocolate goodies in this old box have

got me practically teary eyed with pause. Those shows are so vivid in my imagination now, one of those odd moments when the unbounded, all-knowing god-like qualities of brain and memory are realized. I can see Todd's beaming profile now, especially. I see it just as I had then, half a lifetime ago from a dozen feet away. He turned and looked at me during Just One Victory with a commanding nod, one that seemed to say: "Gotcha!" From that moment onward I knew I was destined to become a musician. Until a few days ago, anyway.

I tuck the old memories away, pile some yellowing newspapers (with band reviews and mentions) on top of them, and stuff a few posters down the sides before closing, taping and burying them within the box. It takes me more than an hour just to unfasten, untie, and unencumber the dozens of posters, photographs and so-called "awards" that wallpaper every side of me. I can't seem to set aside such artifacts without taking a turn down Memory Lane.

I always figured Peace Attack could make it big if the variables and karma worked out right, but it wasn't until Terry, who'd been an old high school friend from Jersey, moved to LA with a guitarist friend of his that I thought it would really happen. That's when the cheesy old handbills I'm now poring over in my left hand turned into the 8" x 10" glossies and multi-colored, silk-screened posters I'm holding in my right. It was so simple: all it took was replacing our original lead guitar player (a buddy at the time, now long forgotten) with Zach Adderly, a wizard with the fretboard. Zach had created his own signature sound: a fuzzy, high-voltage guitar resonance that always seemed on the brink of chaos, but somehow remained steady. It made your hairs stand on end—and made you take notice. I did, right from

his first lick. He hadn't played but a handful of tunes for us when, without any debate, we jumped at the chance and made him an offer. When Zack came aboard, it was a package deal—Terry became part of the extended band, as our manager.

Zach, though, was an odd ball. Coming from me, that's saying something. But, in this case, the doctors backed me up. During the course of our time together he was certified—diagnosed as bipolar.

There were a few advantages to such a condition. At times, he was a rousing performer. The rest of us were typically subdued on stage, and Zach was capable of lifting all our performances, his energy was contagious. Fans loved him, too. He stood nearly six and a half feet tall with long sandy dreadlocks that swung down past his shoulder blades like crocheted blinds, and during his solos, he'd work up a lather and swing his head around with gusto, sending a shower of sweat into the first row or two of a crowd. But the downside of his disorder would ultimately get the best of him. He once got so low he drove his motorcycle at a good clip through the glass door to our recording studio on Vine. No one knew if he was trying to hurt himself or just trash the place, but he managed to accomplish both quite successfully. At other times, he'd go zombie-like for hours on end, and we'd catch him doing things like counting the hairs on his arms as if that were his sole reason for living. We'd sometimes have to physically accost him just to get him on stage, ending up with more than a few bruises of our own. His mood swings, of course, were accentuated by his drug and alcohol intake, and, there came a point where I rarely saw him sober. When Zach stuck to his medication in the early days, he wasn't too bad. But eventually Zach chose to bypass

the Xanax and self-medicate, prescribing himself cures that aren't found behind a pharmacist's desk. It wasn't pretty.

When our rhythm section, Sid and Johnny, got married (to their fiancées, not to each other—just to be clear) and sought some semblance of family life, Zach's wild demeanor and undependability was too much for them to handle day in, day out. Terry and I tried to cushion the situation as middle men, but eventually it wore us out, too. So we met our contractual obligations with the record company and then bid adieu.

Enough. I put off reminiscing for a while and make pretty good headway. My earlier prediction to Anton of three hundred remaining box loads was indeed a bit high, probably just a few dozen really, and the bulk of them are now accounted for. I celebrate this newfound knowledge with a beer, following that up with a visit to the balcony for a smoke. I puff away, enjoying a warm evening breeze that helps dry the residue of sweat lining the back of my neck. My shirt is damp around the pits, and sticky from all sides; it feels gritty, like flypaper. My lower back is aching big-time, and I notice that I've somehow cut my thumb—a reddish crust is already forming along the knuckle. Goddamn, I hate moving. I feel like taking a long nap, but remind myself I have to get back to work in a few minutes. Right after I've smoked the cigarette down to the filter.

The left front pocket of my jeans vibrates as another call comes in. It's Johnny O. calling from his bar and it quickly turns into one of those pass-the-phone-around deals as I get drunken goodbyes from nine or ten friendly souls—many of whom offer creative apologies for not being able to help me earlier in the day with getting the shit in

the truck. “No sweat,” I tell one of them. Several tell me—in no uncertain terms—that there’s still time, that I shouldn’t give up on my music career. Then Hope, an attractive and fairly bright lush who’s now starting to put on the pounds and years, ends up monopolizing the phone. She tells me how she always thought I’d come through for her, that I’d be the one whom she could say: “I knew him when.” She’s such a sweet woman, but she’s getting a little too sentimental and it’s a good bet her eye shadow is spawning tributaries of war paint all over her face. Poor Hope; she always gets to crying. To set her at ease, I tell her how I’m gonna miss LA, miss everyone down at the bar, and that if there was any conceivable way I could piece together a living in the music business I wouldn’t be leaving. “On the bright side,” I say, “now when you come out to the East Coast you’ll have an old friend for a guide.” But Hope says she’s never been east of Las Vegas, and I realize this is it with her and everyone else hanging out at Johnny O’s. After about twenty minutes of awkward fare-theewells and empty promises, the call finally ends and I settle the phone back in my pocket.

I watch a stream of vehicles pass in both directions. Dusk is quickly turning to night and every minute more cars and trucks are turning their headlights on. A dark blue Econoline van moves slower than the general flow of traffic and I wonder if it might be weighted down with gear. That’s what happened to ours in the early days: we sat among stacks of amplifiers, speakers and sound equipment—the occasional groupie on our laps—and rolled in to places like San Francisco, Santa Barbara and Tempe on nearly flat tires.

Back then we were up-and-comers, and the opportunities seemed endless. A then-unknown Death Cab for Cutie opened for us at the

Crocodile in Seattle, and after our set Ben Gibbard inquired as to our interest in doing a “split” CD. I remember brushing him off and maybe even giving him the finger. A major fuck-up on my part, I know, but only hindsight is 20/20. Besides, we were full of ourselves then. With our entourage, we hit all the hipster parties in LA. In fact, we were number three on Beck’s speed dial; we saw him all the time. And the boys in the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club—Peter, Robert and Nick—were our tightest buddies. We signed on the same label and shared the same booking agent and A & R guy. We even did a nationwide tour together: Peace Attack headlining one night, BRMC the next. We also shared a cult leader’s envy of psychoactive drugs, as well as a revolving door of women. When they moved to England to claim their rightful legacy to the Jesus and Mary Chain, they also claimed and whisked away my “girlfriend” Jenna, and Sid’s squeeze, who went by the name of Poppy Seed. Again, no hard feelings; I’m happy for each and every one of them. Perhaps Jenna has even learned the Queen’s English by now.

There’s no denying the ashen nub resting in my fingers and I venture back inside to break another sweat. Within the hour the walls are free of clutter and all the items in my little household are boxed and accounted for. Only the cleaning supplies and my sleeping gear are free of confinement. Oh, and the letter up on the mantle.

I raid the fridge for a final time and it’s just me, half a sandwich, my last beer, and islands of boxes bobbing from the ocean that is my carpet. I use one of the islands as a temporary dining table and munch and swig away. When the Last Supper is finished, I carry all the boxes out and load them into the U-Haul, a process that takes a good thirty

to forty minutes. Finally, after fourteen steady hours of the moving shit, I'm ready to collapse. But I peer around my empty apartment and gauge its appearance without my belongings. For the life of me I can't even imagine what the place looked like just days ago. Now, with the whitewashed walls and smell of disinfectant in the air it barely seems suitable for anyone without a surgeon's mask and gown. Except for the poor soul on the operating table.

The unsettling thought provokes the inevitable questions I've asked myself in the many weeks since accepting Anton's offer to start anew in Cherry Hill. The idea of financial security is comforting, but how long do I really expect to last in a starched shirt selling computer services I honestly couldn't give a damn about? The tree-lined neighborhood streets of Cherry Hill were my boyhood: football games after school, skateboarding with friends, block parties on holidays. It's what the American dream's all about, isn't it? Yet it somehow doesn't hold the same appeal anymore. Perhaps it's a fear of failure, perhaps it's a fear of success; but what I worry about most is life without my Strat, without my guitar. Sometimes I think it'd be easier to put a bullet in my head and get the whole thing over with.

I lay my sleeping pad out and unfasten the clear plastic plug, ready to give it a little mouth-to-mouth. I've just started huffing and puffing when my cell rings again. This time I do glance at the number. It's not immediately familiar, but I go ahead and answer.

"This is Ty."

"Ty, this is Nigel at Pyramid Records."

I hesitate before responding. I had hoped to escape town without speaking to Nigel. Just my fucking luck.

"Are you there?" he asks, in his snide, thick British dialect.

"Yeah," I say, experiencing heart palpitations. "I'm here."

"Well, have you considered our offer? The band wants you along for the ride. They think you're just what they need. We all do."

"Sorry I didn't get back earlier," I say, "but it took a while to make my decision."

"Really?" he says. "And?"

I don't answer for a few seconds. Instead I let what seems like hundreds of images of my years with Peace Attack play through my memory: Zach and Terry, Sid and Johnny; the clubs and bars, the drugs and women. The good times and bad. The times when the only way to make a buck was to give up everything we believed in, to give up on our musical vision. And even then it didn't pay off.

When I deliver the news to Nigel he lets me know what a big mistake I've made, how I've "bloody well fucked up!" my career. Fine, whatever. I'm a biz-dev guy now whose gig is computers and he's just another greedy label pimp. I hang up on him in the middle of his diatribe.

I'm overcome with exhaustion. It's been a hell of a long day and Nigel's unexpected call made it an even longer one. I look at my sleeping pad that's devoid of air—I hadn't sealed the plug when he called so it's back to square one. I kneel down on the floor, but save my breath a while and lie back, finally giving myself a chance to rest. The cottage-cheese ceiling mesmerizes me momentarily, but then I scan the room from the corner of my eyes and my curiosity gets the best of me. I hop up, dizzy from the blood rushing from my head, stumble over to the mantle ledge and swipe the envelope from the perch where it's been resting for days.

I open it. There's a contract in there with an x-mark highlighted next to the line where my signature should be. There's also a quick note from the band, just a few friendly sentences which they've all signed. I toss the note in the trash without thinking, but somehow can't do the same with the contract. I had an idea the numbers were large, but when I see the advance Pyramid had offered—all those dollars!—I start to understand Nigel's shock and dismay.

No sense in lingering over what could have been. I take the lighter from my pocket and set the contract aflame, dropping it into the fireplace. As I watch it burn I know my music career has also come to ashes. I've played my final note.

I'd like to think that it's about integrity. That, for me, it was Peace Attack or bust. More importantly, I'd like to think that it's a maturity thing, and that, at long last, I'm ready to give the real world a try. That I'm finally able to forsake my impractical vision of the world and secure my own future.

Goddamn, I'd like to think that. But I don't. Not really. For now, I'll be happy to take it one day at time.

Speaking of which, tomorrow's going to see lots of tumbleweed and blacktop. Still, I wonder if I can reach Durango by midnight. Maybe I can catch the headliner at the hotel lounge. □